POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST REREADING OF RELIGIOUS DISCURSIVE PRACTICES WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO CHRISTIANITY AND HINDUISM

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SYNOPSIS

Introduction

Postcolonialism is understood as a critical tool that questions the forms of power and the way the knowledge is produced and practised within colonial discursive practices. This has become possible after Orientalism, one of the theoretical foundations for postcolonialism, identified the interplay of knowledge and power in the colonial discourses. Postcolonial reading helped to detect the conscious and dormant elements of colonising powers in the reading of text, discourses and practices. By exposing the aspect of power in the construction of knowledge systems, postcolonialism attempts to neutralise such power relations. This sort of neutralization of power relations in the knowledge discourses is what we call as decolonisation. As a critical tool, it is a convergence of, and inspired by, various strands of critical theories, ranging from Marxism to feminism, from psychology to cultural criticism. As a critical tool, it identifies various forms of colonising practices at the intersection of multiple structures and identities, mainly in the realm of culture.

Postcolonial feminism emerges at the convergence of postcolonial criticism and feminism. What unites them is their mutual resistance to any form of oppression. It affirms varieties of forms of patriarchy and forms of colonialism. It attempts to identify how at the intersection of patriarchy and colonialism, the colonial forms of suppression of women became possible. It identifies how the patriarchal structures aided and abetted colonial strategies. In this sense, it marks a difference from other forms of feminism. Postcolonial feminist reconstructive rereading highlights the voices of women and other subalterns. By extension, in Indian context, the postcolonial feminism attempts to understand how the oppression of native women become possible at the intersection of religion, class, caste, gender, patriarchy, race, region, colonialism and other structures and identities.

Postcolonial religious criticism situates the ways of interpretations of religious texts and religious practices at the centre of dominant religious discourses. Especially in the context of postcolonial biblical criticism, postcolonial biblical scholars identify the ways in which bible was presented and interpreted by the missionaries to the natives, to serve and maintain colonial strategies and interests. Postcolonial feminist criticism of religious practices has the following agenda, that is, 1) the retrieval of the submerged memories of the role of women in religious movements, 2) to understand the relation among women of different castes,

class and religious communities reformulated under modern colonial conditions, 3) to analyse the refashioning of the patriarchy at the interface of multiple structures in different epochs, 4) to identify the patterns of religious discourses which serve to subjugate women, 5) to know the ways in which religious texts are interpreted to strengthen the patriarchal structures and other forms of exploitation, etc. This methodology of postcolonial Biblical criticism can be applied on scriptures of other religions too and its veracity could be tested further.

Review of Literature

In their article, *What Lies Ahead – The Future of Feminist Philosophy*, Kristen Intemaan, Shireen Roshanravan, and others, they discuss about the ways in which the future of feminism needs to proceed, taking into account the concrete experiences of coloniality and the woman of colour, rather than understanding the women as an abstract category in a global context. Towards this end, they propose three aims for the future of feminism, among others. 1) Challenging the universalist and essentialist frameworks with which the different shades of feminism operated so far, without giving place for relativism; 2) Keeping the coloniality and embodiment in the intersecting realities of race and gender, by shifting the emphasis from the abstract understanding of oppression to the concrete cosmologies and struggles of women of colour and women of colonized communities; 3) Elaborating the material conditions of thought, being, and community that should eliminate the atomistic conceptions of women as individually constituted, and autonomous, as it is practised in the feminist discourses today. Their concerns situate the women in the context of material conditions, rather than the essentialisation and universalisation of the suppression of women. Emerging from the colonised conditions of South Africa, their concerns address the postcolonial feminist interests, which go against the universalisation of patriarchal power and the suppression of women. But still, their concerns lack the understanding of how caste, class, geographical location and such other parameters are used by the patriarchy and colonialism to subjugate women.

In her edited book, *Postcolonial Feminism*, Shireen Roshanrvan makes an interesting observation of the postcolonial feminism which is different from the western feminist concerns. This becomes possible because she emerges from her being situated in the post-colonial South African reality. She affirms the view that postcolonial feminist philosophy foregrounds the impact of colonial histories and Western imperialism on racialized gender constructions within and across geopolitical locales. But in the context of postcolonial feminism, she contests the universal applications of the term “woman” to identify and assess the patriarchal victimization and feminist struggles for autonomy in non-Western contexts. Apart from being a critique of Western feminist reductions of third world women to passive victims in need of colonial saviours, postcolonial feminist philosophy criticises the consequences of indigenous adaptations of heteropatriarchy on nationalist, anti-colonial, anti-capitalist and anti-racist struggles in the global South. Heteropatriarchy is the process in

which men dominate and de-skill women in number of forms, from outright attack to paternalistic care, and women devaluing the necessity of female bonding; this process normalises the dominance of one person and the subordination of another. Hence, according to her, the Western feminism does not take into account the colonised experiences of women and so it need to be critiqued along with the heteropatriachal structures which legitimises the subjugation of women. This is the double articulation of postcolonial feminism, according to her. However, she fails to see how the native women used the western critical tools to contest the patriarchal as well as colonial structures, in a hybrid form.

Uma Narayan, in her book, *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Cultures and Third World Feminism*, addresses the main concern of the postcolonial feminists. She elaborates in her book that how western and Third World scholars have misrepresented the third world cultures and feminist agendas in the related fields of nation, identity and tradition. By misrepresenting the nation as singular monolithic culture and portraying the identity and tradition as homogenous in nature, western orientalists and native scholars have failed to understand the complexities of locating the cultural identities, she says. Particularly, however, how the postcolonial feminist scholars address these concerns are important to be noted here. By giving importance to context and localisation, the postcolonial feminism addresses the abstract universalisation of feminist theories. Hence third world feminism needs to be reconstituted as postcolonial feminism to understand the varieties of colonisation under which the native traditions got redefined and refashioned.

In their two part paper on *Border Crossings: Multicultural and Postcolonial Feminist Challenges to Philosophy*, Santra Harding and Uma Narayan discuss about how postcolonial and multicultural feminist thinking refuses to be contained either by the academic disciplinary boundaries or by the categories of race, religion, class, ethnicity, sexuality and nationality, by rethinking the conventional assumptions of knowledge systems. As the sexism, racism, androcentrism and Eurocentrism cannot be identified easily in the covert intentions of the individual actions, they try to search how institutional, societal, philosophical forms of discrimination sanction them to have the effect on the thought of the society. In this way they try to philosophize the 'border crossing' in the context of post-colonial and multicultural reality. However, they do not see how the border crossing is also situated by the contextualised individual reader, which the materials on postcolonial feminist thinking suggest.

it has subverted the modernity's universalisation process into one of the cultural hegemony. The postcolonialism's obsession with reading and rereading of the text can become an esoteric and escapist activity if it does not address the social reality. Further, according In his article, *Charting the Aftermath: A Review of Postcolonial Criticism*, Sugirtharajah identifies feminism as the cognate discipline of postcolonial biblical criticism too. Further, he says that the present globalisation project intensifies power relations in an acute manner, as to him,

with postcolonialism's concentration on the colonial excesses and oppressions, the postcolonialist fails to detect the different forms of oppression perpetrated on the humans through the combination of knowledge and power discourses, whether it is native form of oppression or the imperialist strategy. If such lackings are addressed in a proper theoretical ways, the postcolonialism can be an effective tool in the hands of the oppressed and the policymakers to address the various issues of inequality and discrimination. One of his main concerns is that postcolonialism has to emerge from the level of textual practices to that of the discursive practice, which needs to be addressed.

In his article, *Biblical Criticism and Postcolonial Studies: Toward a Postcolonial Optic*, Fernando F. Segovia points out how the postcolonial biblical reading has yielded to the real reader who is local, perspectival, contextualised and interested reader from the long dominant construct of the scientific reader who is conceived as the universal, objective and de-contextualised reader in the fashion of western rationality. With regard to interpretation and interpreters, the postcolonial biblical criticism presupposes and demands a model with clear implications of the representations of the past as well as that of the present. Such an interpretation, according to him, is decolonisation and liberation as it situates the reader and interpreter in his/her context. In this way, postcolonial feminist rereading of the religious texts and practices will have its implications for the emancipation of women as it situates the women as contextual readers and interpreters of the texts and practices.

In her article, *Making the Connections: Postcolonial Studies and Feminist Biblical Interpretations*, Kwok Pui-lan argues how the gender relations and symbolisations were constructed in the early Christianity in the background of Roman colonialism and how such constructions were used by the missionaries during the modern period. By identifying the different models and strategies with which such constructions were reread by the postcolonial feminist scholars, she comes to the essential question of racism in biblical interpretations in modern period. The European missionaries identified Christianity against the Judaic patriarchy to portray Jesus as the liberator of women. In this way, the colonial missionaries regarded the suppression of women as symptomatic of the inferiority of their cultures and offered to say that Christianity provides a better chance of life. In this way, colonialism, racism, sexism, patriarchy and religion constructed the gender relations.

In her book, *Imagining Hinduism: A Postcolonial Perspective*, Sharada Sugirtharajah argues how in the hands of British orientalists and missionaries the heterogeneous aspects of a complex tradition came to be treated in a monolithic and monolinear fashion and how the orientalists and missionaries were largely instrumental in transforming a disparate tradition into a uniform and manageable system mainly to serve the colonial administrative purposes. By using postcolonial criticism as hermeneutical tools, she tries to deconstruct how William Jones "takes upon himself the task of refining Hindu laws along European legal lines and transforming heterogeneous Sanskrit legal texts into a fixed body of knowledge to serve the administrative needs of the colonial government". The final chapter of her book, *Courtly*

text and courting sati, examines how a contemporary Western woman scholar, Julia Leslie's account of *sati*, in the context of the death of a young woman, Roop Kanwar in Rajasthan in 1987. Contesting the empathetic portrayal of Roop Kanwar as a self-sacrificing woman within the patriarchal Hindu religious system, Sharada says that it falls within the Orientalist mode of interpretation of the event, idealising patriarchal images of women.

Through the review of literature mentioned above are limited, we find that there are various approaches to the rereading of religious texts and practices. Such rereading is also limited in the sense that they give importance to context. Such contextual exercise needs to be expanded to other such religious practices in order to utilise and test the full potentials of postcolonial feminism.

In the present work, the researcher tries to identify and explore the colonialist and patriarchal interpretation of the religious texts and practices, with special reference to Christianity and Hinduism (in its syncretic sense of the term). Here an attempt is made to understand how the knowledge discourses and representations of women at the popular discourses emerge at the intersection of patriarchy, religious discourses, colonialism and other identities. It is also an exposition of how alternative forms of religious practices are available which go against the grain of dominant religious discourses. Such alternative religious discourses lie submerged and which actually contests the dominant religious discourses about women. By exposing and highlighting such alternative cultural discursive practices against the dominant religious discourses, the researcher wants to analyse whether the liberation of women from the patriarchal clutches of the society is possible, by culturally contesting the dominant discourses through a rereading of colonising practices using the postcolonial methods, strategies and critical tools. The rereading becomes necessary as a way to decentralise the power structures and to bring the women back to the centre of discursive practices, as a decolonizing project from the standpoint of the colonised womenfolk.

Objectives

1. Understanding the relations of power in the production of knowledge at a particular historical epoch, following the theory of Orientalism.
2. To bring out the strategies by which the dominant discourses are framed and formed at the intersection of various contesting identities.
3. Analysing the various forms, patterns and strategies of colonialism with the co-optation of other dominant structures.
4. Understanding how the suppression of women becomes possible in the post-colonial context, refashioning the patriarchal structures with the aid of colonialism.
5. Understanding how religious practices and textual interpretations help to serve the oppression of women under colonising conditions.

6. Analysing the ways in which the effects of such dominant discourses can be minimised, if not neutralised, by bringing out the submerged memories and alternatives, towards the formation of a more democratic society.

Research Problems

1. How are women represented in the patriarchal structure within the colonial as well as post-colonial context?
2. How the patriarchal structure is refashioned and redefined in the background of colonialism at the interface of other identities and structures?
3. How does colonialism abet and aid patriarchal structure, with the interface of religious discursive practices?
4. How do religious practices and certain modes of interpretation of religious texts strengthen the patriarchal structures through colonial and post-colonial discourses?
5. What models, strategies, methods, approaches and interventionist possibilities are offered by postcolonial feminist criticism to contest patriarchal structures culturally?

Scope and Significance

Postcolonial feminism makes a connection between postcolonial criticism and feminist criticism to understand the forms of oppression carried out under the colonial and patriarchal structures. There is an increasing awareness that the patriarchal structures got reformulated to hold its hegemonic discourse in the context of colonialism and in the native discourses too. Postcolonial feminist criticism interrogates how the knowledge is produced in the background of the dominant power structures; also it also questions the ways in which the religious texts are interpreted to redefine the patriarchal and colonial structure. At the intersection of various contesting interpretations and identities, one particular interpretation becomes dominant and which in turn, helps the subjugation of other identities. By bringing out such submerged identities, by understanding how the patriarchal discourse becomes the common sense of an era, and postcolonial criticism tries to uplift the position of the women from their suppressive conditions. Postcolonialism, or for that matter postcolonial feminism, as the arena of cultural contestation too offers a wider scope by extending the boundaries of knowledge systems.

Methodology

As postcolonialism does not aim for a grand theory where all forms of suppression can be explained under one theoretical framework, it gives importance to context and multiple interventionist approaches, still using different critical theories. In this context, the present study uses different methods, including but not limited to, descriptive, analytical, critical interpretative, culture-historical and multi-disciplinary approaches. If necessary, the researcher will explore the field study method also.

Sources

In this research, the primary sources will be the selections from religious texts, not restricted to scriptures, of Christianity and Hinduism, such as the standard English translations of Bible, Bhagavad Gita, Ramayana, Mahabharata and Manusmriti. The secondary sources of the study will be the materials and documents on the interpretation and exposition of such texts. Along with these materials, the researcher will use the texts on critical theories to intervene effectively in the interpretation of religious texts and practices.

Chapterisation

In order to explore the theme of this present research, the researcher would approach the problem at hand through the following chapters.

In the ***Introduction***, the researcher will explore the objectives, methodology, sources, scope, significance, contents and limitations of the present study.

First chapter is titled as ***Orientalism and Colonialism – Interplay of Knowledge and Power***. In this chapter the theory of Orientalism as proposed by Edward Said will be explained. Further, how colonialism thrived on the knowledge produced by the Orientalism, especially what is the relation between Orientalism and Colonialism as interplay of knowledge and power for better rule and justification of colonizing others, will be explored by using the Foucauldian analytics of power. Orientalism, according to Said represents 'a complex series of knowledgeable manipulations' by which the Orient was defined as the Other of the Occident, geographically, culturally, politically, morally and intellectually. Here one may say that Orientalism served as a theory and colonialism acted as the practical extension of Orientalism.

Second chapter is titled as ***Postcolonialism to Postcolonial Feminism – History, Method and Practice***. In this chapter how the postcolonialism emerged as a distinct academic discipline by the third world scholars of the Western academics. Further, how the postcolonialism and feminism made the connections by identifying certain common concerns.

The historical transition from colonial discourses to postcolonial discourses happened through many stages. On the one hand, colonialism produced anti-colonial discourses, inverting the knowledge systems that abetted colonialism as a civilizing mission. On the other hand, with the end of colonialism, the formation of the commonwealth created the sense of missing of the 'us' in 'their' discourses. These two strands of anti-colonialism and the English writings of the Commonwealth contributed to the emergence of postcolonialism as an academic discipline in the West. The postcolonial feminism emerges against the universalising tendencies of Western feminism. Western feminism did not understand colonialism as one of the important structure in the framing of patriarchal discourses. With variety of colonial practices and cultural subjugations, which were thought to be neglected by the grand theories, postcolonial feminism emerges giving importance to contexts rather than theorisation. Hence postcolonial feminist criticism understands the position of women

as doubly victimised or double colonization. There is a mutually supportive process of colonialism and patriarchy which produce Eastern women in eroticised terms. This is the case of the colonized women, whereas the Western women's relationship with colonialism is different and complicated. They seem to be empowered as members of the 'civilised' colonizing nation, whereas they seem to be disempowered in relation to the Western patriarchal rubric.

Third chapter is titled as ***Postcolonial Feminist Rereading of Biblical Interpretations and Practices***. In this chapter, the researcher tries to discuss how the bible was used as the nerve centre for the legitimisation of colonial rule and patriarchy. This aspect necessitates the rereading of the biblical interpretations and practices.

"The act of reading in postcolonial contexts is by no means a neutral activity. *How* we read is just as important as *what* we read… The ideas we encounter within postcolonialism and the issues they raise demand that conventional reading methods and models of interpretation need to be rethought if our reading practices are to contribute to the contestation of colonial discourses to which postcolonialism aspires. Rethinking conventional modes of reading is fundamental to postcolonialism", says McLeod.

What postcolonial biblical criticism does is that it situates colonial practices and interventions at the centre of the Bible and biblical reading. It introduced the relation of power and knowledge production into the contours of biblical criticism, to show how the textual interpretation of the missionaries is implicitly interspersed with and linked to the European colonialism. The hybrid and double articulation of the identity of women during the post-colonial period is witnessed by the postcolonial feminists. On the other hand, the male population uses some verses to make the woman passive and submissive elements in the public religious and ritual sphere, allocating them a private space for the women within the church community such as women's cell etc. This shows how the medium of Bible and church, the modern religious spheres, are used for the reification of pre-modern and feudal patriarchal practices using the colonial context.

In the course of the research, the researcher would identify some rereading of Biblical texts, interpretation and Christian religious practices, through the postcolonial feminist eyes, which contest the native patriarchy that co-opts with other dominant discursive practices like colonialism, racism, etc.

Fourth chapter is titled as ***Postcolonial Feminist Rereading of Hindu Religious Texts and Practices***. In this chapter the researcher will explore how the Hindu religious texts, interpretations and practices served the patriarchy to subjugate the women. It is also an exploration of how the patriarchal structures have got redefined and restructured in different colonial contexts. Though there are very less studies in India which explicitly identify themselves with postcolonial feminist criticism of Hindu religious discursive practices, the researcher wants to explore how the women in religious texts have been

reread in the post-colonial period, how the feminism contests the patriarchal and colonial structures by lifting up the submerged cultural memories of valiant women in Hindu texts and practices, and how the gender relations have got redefined and reshaped at the interface of colonialism, patriarchy and Hindu religious beliefs and practices.

When the modernity introduced by colonialism offered the chance for women education, the patriarchal structure did not allow them to do so. Against which Sharmila Rege quotes the tradition of entitlement of women to *Upanayan* in *Atharva Veda*, the practice of reciting the *mantras* of the *Vedas* mentioned in *Shrauta Sutras*, the testimony of Panini about the attendance of women in *Gurukul* in his work Ashtadhyai and the practice of teaching *Vedas* to girl students by women as mentioned in Patanjali's *Maha Bhashya* to contest the patriarchal arguments against women education in modern period. It is clear that this contestation happens at the intersection of colonial modernity, patriarchy, religious texts and gender.

Such rereadings of religious texts, interpretations and discourses from the feminist standpoint during the post-colonial context contest native patriarchy. Though modernity, introduced by colonialism, seems to be exhibited in a positive light, it has also been contested by the postcolonial feminists how it affected the traditional structures like family, to the detriment of women. There are different strategies, methods and interventions in bringing out the subjugation of women under the patriarchy, at the interface of colonialism, gender and religion. Such studies will be carried out by the researcher in the course of research.

In the ***Conclusion***, the aspects discussed in the earlier chapters will be analysed and proper conclusions will be made based on them.

Limitations

As a movement springing from the third wave of feminism, postcolonial feminism gives importance to the cultural aspects and how the material conditions affect the cultural aspects and vice versa. But the economic aspects of reality are not given its due place in this study, though colonialism is understood as the material condition affecting the cultural reality.

The postcolonial feminism emerges against the universalising tendencies of Western feminism, and as postcolonialism does not give importance to the formation of grand theories, the postcolonial feminism too gives importance to contextual understanding.

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